

Economic Stimulus, Don't Ask, Don't Tell

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The president recently repeated his campaign pledge to repeal the Pentagon's "Don't ask, Don't tell" policy that bars openly gay men and women from serving in the military. Do you agree?

The "Don't ask, Don't tell" policy is wrong, plain and simple. And it's wrong for a lot of reasons.

Let's start with some practical issues. We may be wrapping up our misguided occupation of Iraq, but at the same time we're increasing our armed presence in Afghanistan. I remain opposed to our presence in those countries, but I find it curious to reject soldiers during wartime for their sexual orientation.

Even worse, from a strategic standpoint, are the kinds of soldiers being discriminated against. The Pentagon has trouble attracting enough Arabic and Farsi translators, but even so we've seen dozens of gay translators with vital language skills let go.

It's not a stretch to say this policy has national security implications.

It is true that we've seen fewer soldiers drummed out of the military for being gay since the 9/11 terrorist attacks (by two-thirds, some reports claim). But to me, that merely suggests the Pentagon is happy to single out gay soldiers during peacetime but more reluctant during wartime. To say that violates fundamental American values of fairness and equality is an understatement.

And then there's the moral issues. Since the law was implemented in 1993, more than 13,000

volunteer soldiers-volunteers sworn to protect our country-have been kicked out of the military. That's 13,000 people who were told that their service isn't wanted because they're gay.

A white commander wouldn't ground a pilot because she's black. An Asian general couldn't court martial an officer because she's a woman. Even the Surgeon General can't punish a Navy cook because he smokes.

But gay soldiers have been classified as inferior and are fair game for punitive action. That's wrong.

When the president announced his renewed push to repeal this wrong-headed law, I described the policy as repugnant. I wish I could find harsher words.

There's support from the public for repeal, support from current and former military brass and movement in both houses of Congress. I hope we can quickly correct this 17-year-old problem once and for all.

We just passed the one-year anniversary of the stimulus bill. What's the status report?

Before health insurance reform took over the airwaves, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (better known as the economic stimulus bill) filled the headlines.

The bill still attracts a fair number of critics, but I believe-and experts from across the political spectrum agree-that the stimulus saved our economy. And it continues to form the foundation of our economic recovery.

I've explained in this space before the trauma our economy has experienced. We continue to see repercussions from that shock through high unemployment rates and depleted bank accounts.

It's always hard to prove a negative, but experts agree that without the stimulus, we'd be in far worse shape than we are today. Unemployment around 10 percent is dangerously high, but economists suggest that that number could be more than double without the stimulus.

In addition to billions of dollars devoted to construction projects, the stimulus also tossed a lifeline to millions of families. Whether through food assistance, health care subsidies or much-needed unemployment benefits, the stimulus kept many families from a far worse fate.

Santa Cruz has received in the ballpark of \$90 million from the stimulus so far in project funds, benefits and tax cuts. The Making Work Pay tax credit alone injected around \$30 million into the local economy. We've seen projects funded ranging from public housing renovation and a \$4.7 million business incubator at the Salz Tannery to salaries for nine police officers and a host of energy-efficiency projects. And some of our most at-risk populations-recipients of Social Security, Supplemental Security Income and VA benefits-received one-time payments to help cover rising costs.

We continue to see opposition to this bill, but we've also seen more than 100 Republican members of Congress celebrate stimulus projects in their home towns-soon after bad-mouthing the bill as a waste of money, I must add.

The stimulus wasn't a cure-all, but it helped reverse many bad policies from the previous administration and it is helping to stabilize our economy. By any measure, I call that a success.